

8/25/04

Remarks at the Groundbreaking Ceremony

Normandy American Cemetery

by

U.S. Representative David Obey

August 25, 2004

All of us in our lives want to make a difference. This place honors those

who made a huge difference for their country and for the world.

As we are appropriately reminded today, what happened here sixty years ago was no less than the battle for the future of western civilization. These values of freedom and liberty “of liberte,’ egalite,’ and fraternite’” were challenged by the evil of fascism and the Nazi terror which had overwhelmed Europe. The combined forces of free societies gathered to challenge that evil in this very place where we now stand.

On that day the outcome was by no means certain. But, united in common purpose, the allied armies and the French Resistance prevailed. The tide of the war was turned.

The inscription on the Chapel wall here says it better than any of us here today could: They “œendured all and gave all that justice among nations might prevail and that mankind might enjoy freedom and enjoy peace.”

The legacy of their accomplishment and sacrifice, and the lesson for our world today, is the knowledge that when free nations unite as allies in common purpose, the forces of freedom will prevail.

Our delegation today from the Congress of the United States, like most visitors, comes to this hallowed site for a variety of reasons.

We come first to honor the 9,400 brave Americans who died here sixty years ago and whose remains are interred in this beautiful memorial park. We remember them as the bravest of our American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines – as human beings whose strength, courage, and ability has for all time become the very definition of heroism and sacrifice.

We remember them not just as foot soldiers in that great armada of liberation, but also as fallen sons, fathers, brothers, and husbands. The deaths of our soldiers, whether here sixty years ago or today in Iraq and Afghanistan, are equally the sacrifices of each of their families. The poignancy of this loss becomes clear when we visit the graves of the father and son and the 38 pairs of brothers who rest side by side a few yards from us.

For me personally, I come especially to pay my respects to the 185 Wisconsin sons who are buried here.

Second, beyond remembering the battle and honoring these heroes, our delegation has come here today for another important reason. We have come to renew the commitment of the United States that this remarkable accomplishment will be remembered forever!!!

We break ground today on a new Interpretive Center for the Normandy Cemetery. This magnificent Center will further honor those who rest here in perpetuity and that will always be its primary function.

But, it is our hope that it will also be a facility, as an interpretive center, which will place this momentous battle into its proper historical context.

Three years ago Congressman Jack Murtha and I felt the need for a different sort of visitor center than was built 50 years ago. I know Congressman Hobson feels the same way.

My uncle, a World War II veteran, died just a few months ago. As the World War II generation passes on, we believe it is critical that a modern facility be designed which will tell this story – the enormity and complexity of the undertaking here...its great risk and the courage and sacrifice of the soldiers who scaled the cliffs and crossed the open beaches to open the closed door of Nazi Europe to freedom.

The role of this new Normandy Center will be to remind future generations of the price paid for that freedom during those tumultuous days sixty years ago.

But it will also teach the lesson of what can be accomplished when free nations and free people work together with unshakable will as allies against tyranny.

When our Committee reviewed the design for the new center a few weeks ago, we were convinced that it would fulfill these dual roles. It will honor the battle; it will honor the alliance of freedom; it will honor the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who fought here. Through it, America and the world will always remember this lesson:

On June 6, 1944, on these Norman beaches, the Allied armies opened the locked gates of an imprisoned Europe. Because of their sacrifice, we today are free.

Our hope in building this new Center is that future generations will understand the importance of this turning point in history.

It will remind us all that when free nations and free peoples stand together as a partnership of allies we will survive and prosper. It will remind us that the price of freedom is not cheap. It will remind us that at crucial times, sheer human courage, determination, and selflessness can overcome the greatest of evils, the longest of odds, the most difficult circumstances.

These crosses and the Center we begin today will stand together in eloquent, silent tribute to that truth!

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